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ABSTRACT

Rapid ingestion of alcohol is common and unfortunately an all too frequent cause of alcohol-related death among young people. Drinking a lot of alcohol over a short amount of time may result in an alcohol overdose. This situation is a medical emergency and requires sound decision making. The information the campus community needs to know includes how an alcohol overdose may lead to death, danger signs of an alcohol overdose, and what to do. A campus program to reduce binge drinking and alcohol overdose may include: a clear policy defining alcohol overdose as a medical emergency; educating students about the risks of an alcohol overdose; training of faculty, staff, and student leaders; and holding an alcohol awareness day. Responding to and preventing alcohol overdose must be part of ongoing campus programs designed to reduce alcohol abuse and other drug use. Understanding the risks of binge drinking and overdosing from alcohol, knowing how to respond to these situations, knowing what one drinks, counting drinks if one chooses to drink alcohol, and identifying what is a safer consumption level for each individual drinker are all necessary. Programs which address these issues directly and honestly and which also involve students in planning and implementation can save lives and needless pain. (ABL)

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Preventing and Responding to Alcohol Overdose on The College Campus

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Preventing and Responding to Alcohol Overdose on the College Campus

The rapid ingestion of alcohol is common (Wechsler & Isaac, 1991, Culhane, 1991) and unfortunately an all too frequent cause of alcohol related death among young people. "Acute alcohol intoxication" has caused the death of college students (e.g. Elgen, 1991) or may result in a situation where someone nearly dies. In the mid-Michigan area where I live, during a recent twelve month period four young people (not college students) aged approximately 16-21 died from the results of an alcohol overdose. These deaths were needless. All members of the community must be educated about the risks inherent in drinking large quantities of alcohol during a short period of time.

The purpose of this paper is to outline what information needs to be disseminated throughout campus, identify the key components of a campus program to reduce binge drinking, teach others how to respond to alcohol overdose situations, and provide some examples of components of such a program.

Alcohol Overdose

Many people are unaware that an alcohol overdose is possible. Alcohol is usually thought to be a safe drug with the most serious consequences being falling asleep or loss of motor coordination (Keeley, 1982). Drinking a lot of alcohol over a short amount of time (binge drinking) may result in an alcohol overdose. This situation is a medical emergency and requires sound decision making in order to respond in a helpful manner. The information the campus community needs to know includes how an alcohol overdose may lead to death, danger signs of an alcohol overdose, and what to do. This information is presented below and is based upon information provided by the American Red Cross (1973), Engs (1987), and Khabir (1990).

How An Alcohol Overdose May Lead to Death

Choking on one's own vomit after an alcohol overdose is a very common cause of an alcohol-related death. Vomiting after drinking occurs as the body struggles to defend itself against excessive alcohol intake. It is a very natural reflex. Alcohol is a poison and what the body is trying to do is get rid of the poison. Death from asphyxiation occurs when the body's reflexes become depressed from alcohol to the point where a person is unable to vomit properly. When the person vomits and asphyxiates, he or she is so unresponsive that normal mechanisms that tell one to cough and clear one's airways are not working.

These symptoms of an alcohol overdose may occur when a person has been drinking: The drinker does not respond to being talked to or shouted at; does not respond to being pinched, shaken or poked; cannot be stood up; will not wake up; may have slow, labored, or otherwise abnormal respiration; may have a purplish color or clammy feeling skin; may have a rapid pulse rate, irregular heart rhythm, lowered blood pressure or respiratory depression.

Do not leave a person alone who is unconscious. Someone should be with the person at all times. If the person is unresponsive to shaking or being stimulated slightly as described above, he or she should be seen by a physician immediately. This is a medical emergency, so appropriate help should be obtained. The local emergency number should be called. If the person has passed out he or she may have sustained a serious head, neck or back injury. If someone drinks too much: The person should not be left alone; the person should be laid on his or her side or put in a sitting position with the head bowed; do not give food or drink; do not induce vomiting; the person should be asked if he or she took other drugs or is taking prescription medication that interacts with alcohol or if the person has any underlying medical

illness such as diabetes or epilepsy; reach into mouth and clear airway if the person vomits; provide artificial respiration if indicated; seek medical attention if the person is unresponsive or "semi-comatose." **If one is unsure what to do, the local emergency number should be called for assistance.**

Model Campus Program

A campus program to reduce binge drinking and alcohol overdose may include the following:

- A clear policy defining alcohol overdose as a medical emergency and which guides action in overdose situations. Such policies should be widely disseminated and discussed particularly in residence halls, greek lettered organizations, and other places where large numbers of students live or interact.
- All students should be educated about the risks of an alcohol overdose and how to respond as discussed above, that if one chooses to drink alcohol drinks should be counted, one should know what is being consumed, and also establish what is for them a safer number of drinks.
- Faculty, staff and student leaders should be trained concerning the risks of binge drinking and how to respond in alcohol overdose situations.
- An alcohol overdose awareness day could be conducted once each semester. Develop and distribute posters warning students of the dangers of binge drinking and how to respond to potential overdose situations. BACCHUS Canada (c/o Neill Wycik Co-op, P.O. Box 213, Toronto, Ontario, MSB, 1G7, 417-599-0401) has developed some educational materials in this topic.

Program Examples

At Central Michigan University when a student living in the residence halls overdoses on alcohol, residence hall staff respond to the situation as a medical emergency. Hall directors evaluate the situation, call Public Safety and if Public Safety officers assess the situation as an overdose an ambulance is called. Then the student is transported to the local hospital emergency room. This process takes only a few minutes. An incident report is written. Following release from the hospital, the student is required to see an alcohol educator to aid the student in evaluating the situation from an educational perspective. Students may be referred to counseling by the alcohol educator.

Also at Central Michigan University a sorority recently provided an evening dinner meeting of presidents and social chairs of all the sororities on campus. Motivated by an alcohol overdose near tragedy the dinner included discussion of the importance of all the sororities cooperating regarding enforcement of their alcohol policies, legal liabilities as a social host, alcohol overdose, a discussion of an alcohol overdose situation involving one of the sororities, and role playing a "carefrontation" of a problem drinker. Hopefully, the information presented will be passed on to each sorority's membership. Informal evaluations indicated attendees were satisfied and found the information presented very interesting and useful.

Conclusion

Ruth Ann Maniteau, the mother of a sixteen year old young man who died from an alcohol overdose, recently said:

> "Talk to them [students and others] about drinking. Don't stop with just talking about drinking and driving. We've done a good job with that. My son gave his car keys to his girlfriend that night [when he died]. He knew to do that, but we didn't do a good enough job of warning him about the other dangers." (Woolston, 1991).

Responding to and preventing alcohol overdoses must be part of ongoing campus programs designed to reduce alcohol abuse and other drug use. Understanding the risks of binge drinking and overdosing from alcohol, knowing how to respond to these situations, knowing what one drinks, counting drinks if one choose's to drink alcohol, and identifying what is safer consumption for each individual drinker are all necessary. Programs which address these issues directly and honestly and which also involve students in planning and implementation can save lives and needless pain.

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